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THE GOSPELS

Catholic Answers

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Jimmy Akin



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Introduction

The four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—are our principal sources of information about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. For two thousand years, they have nourished the faith of Christians across the world.

In our own, skeptical age, the Gospels still have a unique place. Even those who don't regard Jesus with the eyes of faith acknowledge that he is the most influential man ever to have lived, having left a major mark on history, culture, and language.

Non-believers still say something is “Gospel truth” when they assert a claim and warn against taking something “as Gospel” when they doubt it. This association with truth is one of the Gospels' enduring legacies.

Though the Gospels are more accessible to people than ever before in history—with countless translations and editions available, even free of charge online—knowledge of the Gospels and what they teach about Jesus has plummeted in recent years.

Many use phrases that they don't even realize came from Jesus (“wolves in sheep's clothing,” “turn the other cheek,” “go the extra mile”). Others have only a vague idea of Jesus as a wise moral teacher and know almost nothing about the facts of his life and death—or their significance.

There is tremendous confusion about the Gospels themselves. How are they different from one another? Do they contain contradictions or falsehoods? Who wrote them? When? Weren't there other gospels in the early Church? How much authority should they be given?

Every year—often at Christmas and Easter—major publishers release new books that cast doubt upon the Gospels. There are sensationalistic news stories that offer wild, alternative theories concerning the “truth” about Jesus. And every few years, the discovery of a new ancient document is announced with hype as finally revealing what really happened with Jesus and his apostles.

Christians do not need to be disturbed by this media-driven frenzy. The Gospels remain as reliable as they have always been. In reality, they are the inspired word of God, and even considered from a purely historical perspective—apart from faith—they are extraordinarily valuable and accurate sources of information.

Here we will answer twenty questions about the four Gospels, where they

came from, why they are superior to other purported gospels, and how you can grow closer to Jesus Christ by reading them.

1. What is a Gospel?

In the simplest terms, a *Gospel* is an ancient Christian book about Jesus. When people refer to the “Gospels,” they’re typically referring to the four canonical ones. However, there also are non-canonical gospels that are not included in the New Testament (see answer 19).

The Greek term for *gospel* (*euangelion*) means “good news,” and it could be used in a variety of senses. Naturally, it could refer to hearing about any good thing that had happened. However, it often was used to refer to announcements by or about the Roman emperor.

The emperor often was regarded as the son of a god, and his person represented the peace and security of the empire. Whatever he announced was at least supposed to be good news for the people, and so it would be declared to be “good news” (whether it really was or not).

It thus was natural for Christians to announce the coming of the true Son of God and his kingdom as good news, and so St. Mark begins his book with these words: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” It is probably from this verse that the book of Mark came to be known as a “Gospel,” and from there the term spread to other canonical and non-canonical works.

Because the canonical ones are known as Gospels (Greek, *Euangelia*), their authors are known as the four Evangelists—with a capital *E*, to distinguish them from ordinary evangelists, who share the message of Jesus generally.

When it comes to the *kind* of books the canonical Gospels are, they are essentially biographies. That is, they tell us about the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

Biographies were common in the ancient world. The Greek term for a biography is *bios* (“life”), and many ancient authors wrote *bioi*—or lives—of important men, including emperors, kings, statesmen, generals, and philosophers. Some of the most famous include Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* and Suetonius’s *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*.

There are differences between modern biographies and ancient lives. Today, authors may write biographies about people just because they’ve had

interesting lives (for example, biographies of movie stars or other celebrities). However, ancient lives had an instructional purpose. Readers were meant to learn *lessons* from the lives of the people they read about.

Thus, in his *Parallel Lives*, Plutarch wrote about similar noble figures—a Greek in parallel with a Roman—so that his readers could learn what made the men great and what they might want to imitate. Similarly, in *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, Suetonius discusses both the good things and the bad things the first twelve Roman emperors did—partly so that people would know what good rulers should *and should not* do.

The four Gospels share this instructional quality, and we are meant to take away important lessons for our lives. John states, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name” (20:30–31).

Similarly, in Matthew, Jesus says, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock” (7:24).

Sometimes people wonder whether the Gospels were meant for Christian audiences or whether they were evangelistic documents meant to convince people to become Christian. The answer is the former, and the reason is the cost involved in producing copies of the Gospels.

Today, individual Gospels and even entire New Testaments can be mass-produced cheaply and given away for free, making them usable as evangelistic tools. But before the printing press, every word had to be handwritten by a scribe, and every sheet of papyrus or parchment had to be painstakingly manufactured by hand.

As a result, a single copy of one of the Gospels was fantastically expensive, with Matthew costing the equivalent of around \$2,200, Mark around \$1,400, Luke around \$2,400, and John around \$1,900.¹ Only rich people and congregations that pooled resources could afford them, making it clear that they could not be handed out as evangelistic tracts, so they were meant for people who were already committed Christians.

2. What is the Gospel of Matthew?

The Gospels have been arranged in different orders, but today Matthew is

placed first in the New Testament, and so it is commonly referred to as the “first Gospel.”

Historically, many people have also regarded it as the first Gospel to be written, but today, most scholars hold that it was the second or third.

The traditional author is St. Matthew the tax-collector (Matt. 9:9), who became one of the twelve apostles (10:3).

Scholars have noted that Matthew is the most Jewish in orientation, and it devotes particular attention to Jewish concerns. Some Christians—like St. Paul—were accused of overturning the Law of Moses (Rom. 3:31), and so Matthew made sure to record Jesus saying, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them” (Matt. 5:17).

However, Matthew also ensures that the reader knows that Gentiles have a place in the Church, too, and so he points out that Jesus had multiple Gentile ancestors (Rahab, Ruth, and the “wife of Uriah” the Hittite; 1:5–6).

He then concludes his Gospel with Jesus’ command: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations”—that is, the Gentiles—“baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (28:19–20).

It thus appears that Matthew was written for an audience of Jewish Christians, and one of its goals was to help them understand the place of Gentiles in the Church.

Matthew is one of two Gospels (the other being Luke) that has an *Infancy Narrative* or information about Jesus’ early life. The Evangelist begins by presenting a genealogy of Jesus tracing his line back to Abraham via David’s son Solomon (1:1–17). He then turns to the birth and early life of Jesus, focusing on his foster father, Joseph (1:18–2:23).

After this, Matthew records Jesus’ earthly ministry, which mostly took place in Galilee (chs. 3–20), before turning to the last week of Jesus’ life and the Passion and Resurrection Narratives (chs. 21–28).

Inserted into this material about Jesus’ life are five major speeches that contain the majority of Jesus’ teachings in the Gospel. Matthew is an organizer, and one of the things he does is collect sayings of Jesus that are scattered in different places in other Gospels and arrange them by topic into major speeches. The five speeches are:

- The Sermon on the Mount (chs. 5–7)
- The Evangelistic Discourse (ch. 10)
- The Kingdom Parables (ch. 13)
- The Church Discipline Discourse (ch. 18)
- The Olivet Discourse (chs. 23–25)

These speeches are arranged in a kind of literary pyramid known to scholars as a *chiasm*. The first speech gives Jesus’ ethical teachings, corresponding to the Law of Moses, and the last contains his prophetic teachings, corresponding to the Old Testament prophetic books. These two speeches thus correspond to the Law and the Prophets—the principal parts of the Hebrew scriptures (cf. 22:40).

Between them are two shorter speeches dealing with the Church. Chapter 10 deals with the Church’s relationship with outsiders and the need to bear witness to and evangelize them, while chapter 18 deals with problems inside the Church and how Christians relate to one another.

At the very center of the discourses are Jesus’ parables about the central mystery of his teaching—the kingdom of God.

It is easy to see how Matthew composed these speeches by collecting sayings from different places. The core of the Sermon on the Mount is found in Luke 6:20–49, but Matthew added sayings found elsewhere in Luke, such as Jesus’ parables about salt and light (Matt. 5:13–16/Luke 14:34–35, 8:16, 11:33).

Similarly, the core of Matthew’s Olivet Discourse is found in Luke 21:5–36, but Matthew adds sayings here, too (see Matt. 24:23–28/Luke 17:23–24, 37).

Another of Matthew’s interests is showing how Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies. All of the Evangelists do this, but Matthew often points it out explicitly, using a formula like, “All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ‘Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel’” (1:22–23; cf. Isa. 7:14). Matthew has ten such fulfillment notices in his Gospel (1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9).

Matthew also points out in a subtler way how Jesus fulfilled prophecy. Moses declared that the “Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like

me from among you” (Deut. 18:15), and this was understood to apply not only to individual prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. It was also understood to apply to *one particular prophet*, who would function like a new Moses.

Matthew subtly portrays Jesus as that prophet, recording how Jesus escaped death as a small child (Matt. 2:13–14/Exod. 1:15–2:10), how he passed through water (Matt. 3:13–17/Exod. 14:21–22), how he spent time in the desert (Matt. 4:1–11/Exod. 15:22–Deut. 34:12), and how he announced God’s law from a mountain (Matt. 5–7/Exod. 19:16–20:21). Matthew thus shows both explicitly and implicitly how Jesus fulfilled prophecy.

3. What is the Gospel of Mark?

The Gospel of Mark is placed after Matthew, and so it is often referred to as the “second Gospel.”

It is attributed to John Mark, a young man whom we meet in Acts (12:12) and who became the traveling companion of St. Peter (1 Pet. 5:13).

Early Christian sources indicate that Mark wrote his Gospel at Rome, that it was based on the preaching of St. Peter, and that it was written for a Gentile audience—a fact confirmed by the way Mark explains Jewish customs for the reader (7:3–4).

Historically, many people thought Mark was written after Matthew, but today, most scholars believe that it actually was the first Gospel written (see answer 11). Mark may have been the first person to try to tell the story of Jesus in written form, making him the pioneer who laid the foundation the other Evangelists would build on.

This could explain why Mark’s Gospel is rough around the edges—*literally*. It both begins and ends in abrupt ways.

Ancient biographies didn’t always begin with a discussion of their subject’s family and birth, but they usually did. Mark, however, has no Infancy Narrative telling where Jesus came from. He simply says, “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (1:1)—as if he’s expecting us to know already who Jesus is. He then says, “John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness” (1:4), expecting us to know who John the Baptist is.

This is possible because Mark was written for people who were already Christians and would know about Jesus and John the Baptist. But the way

Mark ends is even more startling.

According to some of our most important manuscripts, Mark ends very suddenly after the women have found the empty tomb and encountered an angel. Mark states, “And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (16:8). Surprisingly, these manuscripts do not go on to mention any of Jesus’ post-Resurrection appearances to the disciples.

The twelve verses that follow (16:9–20)—although regarded as canonical—are different in style and largely repeat things found in other Gospels and the Acts. Most scholars regard them as a later—but still early—composition to give the Gospel a sense of completeness by relating what happened next.

Many have wondered how to explain Mark’s apparent, abrupt original ending. One suggestion is that the original ending was lost, but if so, this would have had to happen *very* early, or copies would have been made that preserved it.

Another suggestion is that Mark was interrupted before he could finish writing, but that seems unlikely. Why didn’t he go on to complete it, and why don’t we have other manuscripts—written in Mark’s style—that preserve his ending?

Some have suggested that Mark is doing something super-clever by ending his Gospel at this point, as if he’s saying to the reader, “The women didn’t tell people about Jesus. What about *you*? Are *you* going to tell them about him?” But this *avant-garde* move seems too clever by half.

A recent suggestion is that Mark’s Gospel was never *meant* to be a finished, polished work. Instead, it belongs to a class of ancient writings known as *hupomnemata* (Greek, “memoirs”). These were collections of research notes intended to be the *basis* of later, polished works. They were meant to be supplemented and reworked—sometimes by another author.²

If so, it looks as though that’s exactly what Matthew and Luke did—took Mark, supplemented it, and polished it so that it was in good literary form (see answers 11 and 12).

Mark also has a less polished style. He repeatedly uses the Greek word *euthus* (“immediately”) to convey a sense of dynamic urgency: *immediately*, Jesus did this, and then *immediately* he did that. Repetition of *euthus* is one of the things Matthew and Luke eliminate in polishing Mark’s prose.

Also, like the other synoptic Gospels (see answer 9), Mark spends most of his time discussing Jesus' ministry in Galilee (chs. 1–10), followed by an account of his last week, Passion, and death (chs. 11–16), but he gives few of Jesus' teachings. This is odd, since Mark regards Jesus as a great teacher (4:38, 5:35, 9:17, etc.), and one of the things Matthew and Luke do is supplement Mark's action-oriented narrative by including more of Jesus' teachings.

Despite its roughness, Mark became one of the most influential books in history, and it provided a good foundation for the other Evangelists to build upon.

4. What is the Gospel of Luke?

Luke is commonly referred to as the third Gospel, because of its placement after Matthew and Mark. It is generally thought that it was the second or third Gospel to be written.

It is attributed to St. Luke—a physician and traveling companion of Paul (see Acts 16:11; Col. 4:14). It is generally held that Luke—alone among the New Testament authors—was a Gentile. Luke also is the author of the Acts of the Apostles, which covers the history of the Church from the Resurrection to about A.D. 60.

Luke begins with a preface in which he explains the purposes for which he wrote:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed (1:1–4).

Luke acknowledges that others had previously written about Jesus, and he indicates that his own sources included “eyewitnesses and ministers of the word”—that is, people who personally saw Jesus and his ministry, as well as others who were considered qualified ministers of Christ.

Luke wished to write an “orderly account” for a man called Theophilus,

who was likely the patron that financed the production of the Gospel. What Luke means by “orderly account” is uncertain. He may be referring to an account in *chronological* order or in good *literary* order.

Luke has an infancy narrative covering Jesus’ early life (chs. 1–2). It discusses the birth of Jesus’ older kinsman John the Baptist, relates events from Mary’s perspective rather than Joseph’s, and includes an incident when Jesus was twelve—the Finding in the Temple (2:41–52). Luke twice mentions that Mary “kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (2:19, 51), indicating that Mary was the source of this material.

Luke includes chronological information, telling us that John the Baptist began his ministry in the “fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar” (3:1)—that is, A.D. 28—and that Jesus “was about thirty years of age” when he began his ministry (3:23). Luke also gives a genealogy of Jesus, but—unlike Matthew’s—it traces Jesus’ descent through David’s son Nathan rather than Solomon, and it goes all the way back to Adam, the original son of God (3:23–38).

As a physician, Luke is especially interested in Jesus’ role as a healer, and he is more positive toward doctors than Mark. Discussing a woman with a persistent hemorrhage, Mark states that she “had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse” (5:26). Luke softens this to say that she “had spent all her living upon physicians and could not be healed by anyone” (8:43).

Luke’s Gospel is the longest of the four, and it contains memorable passages not found in the others. These include the parables of the good Samaritan (10:25–37), the prodigal son (15:11–32), and Lazarus and the rich man (16:19–31).

Like Mark, Luke’s Gospel was written principally for Gentile Christians. This is illustrated by its dedication to “Theophilus” (a Greek name) and by how Luke clarifies Jewish matters for his audience. For example, Matthew and Mark link the coming destruction of Jerusalem to the “desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel” (Matt. 24:15; cf. Mark 13:14). But non-Jewish readers would not be familiar with Daniel’s prophecy, and Luke omits this and instead says, “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near” (21:20).

5. What is the Gospel of John?

St. John's Gospel is commonly called the "fourth Gospel" because of its placement in the New Testament, but it also is thought to be the last written.

It is attributed to a man named John who was an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry (21:20–24), and he has classically been regarded as John, son of Zebedee, one of the Twelve (Matt. 10:1–2).

John's Gospel begins with the famous declaration, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." This is an allusion to the first verse of Genesis ("In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth"), and it indicates the divinity of Jesus ("the Word"; see 1:14).

John also closes his Gospel with an affirmation of Christ's divinity, when the apostle Thomas falls at the feet of the resurrected Jesus and confesses him to be "my Lord and my God" (20:28).

John is different from the other Gospels (see answers 9 and 10). It omits much that they include and includes much that they omit. Except for the last week of Jesus' life, the other Gospels focus almost entirely on his ministry in Galilee, but John focuses more on his ministry in Judea and Jerusalem. The other Gospels mention Jesus taking only one trip to Jerusalem—at the end of his life—but John mentions multiple trips. And the others mention only one Passover—when Jesus was crucified—but John mentions three Passovers (2:13; 6:4; 11:55).

It's because of how John ties Jesus' activities to feasts that we are able to tell that his ministry lasted three years. If we had only the others to go by, we might have concluded that it lasted only a year.

Another difference is the way John presents Jesus' teaching. Matthew, Mark, and Luke record Jesus teaching in pithy, memorable statements (e.g., "the last will be first, and the first last"; Matt. 20:16) or parables like the parable of the Sower (Matt. 13:3–9). When they do present Jesus giving longer blocks of teaching, these tend to be collections of shorter sayings—like Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (chs. 5–7), which compiles Jesus' sayings on moral subjects.

By contrast, John presents Jesus making longer statements, often as part of ongoing conversations with his critics or disciples. The longest of these is the Farewell Discourse, which stretches over five of John's twenty-one chapters (chs. 13–17)—a quarter of the book!

The content of the teaching also is different. The other Gospels record Jesus

teaching on a variety of subjects, including specific moral questions like anger (Matt. 5:21–26), adultery (5:27–30), and divorce (5:31–32).

However, John mentions only Jesus' general command to love one another (13:34–35, 15:9–12) and focuses on Jesus' teachings about his identity as God's Son. In the Old Testament, God uses "I am" as one of his names (Exod. 3:14), and Jesus also applies "I am" to himself to indicate he is Yahweh, as in his famous statement, "before Abraham was, I am" (8:58; cf. 8:24, 28; 13:19; 18:5–9). John also contains seven "I am" sayings that deal with aspects of Jesus' identity (e.g., "I am the Bread of Life," 6:35; cf. 8:12; 10:9; 11–14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1–5).

Additionally, John records more of Jesus' teachings regarding the third Person of the Trinity—the Holy Spirit. In John, Jesus stresses the role of the Holy Spirit in salvation (3:3–8), promises to give the Spirit (7:37–39), emphasizes the role of the Spirit in the life of the disciples as the "Paraclete" (14:16–17, 26; 15:26; 16:7–11, 13–15), and bestows the Holy Spirit on the disciples so they can forgive or retain sins (20:21–23).

In light of this strong emphasis on such exalted subject matter—the persons of the Trinity—Clement of Alexandria said John had written a particularly "spiritual Gospel."³

6. Are the Gospels anonymous?

It is sometimes claimed that the four Gospels are anonymous, with the implications that we don't know who wrote them, that they likely weren't written by their traditional authors, and that they may not be very accurate.

The names of the Evangelists don't appear in the *text* of the Gospels—only in ascriptions at the front of the documents. If you wanted, you could say that the *text* of the Gospels is formally anonymous due to authors' names not appearing in it, but the books are *not* anonymous. They have author attributions right up front, being identified as the Gospels "according to" Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

This is normal for books—both ancient and modern. In his dialogues, Plato never identifies himself by name as the author. He never inserts himself into the flow of the narrative and says, "I—Plato—wrote this." Neither do most other ancient authors.

Modern ones also tend not to. For example, skeptical scholar Bart

Ehrman's book *Misquoting Jesus* never names Ehrman as the author in the text of the book. *Misquoting Jesus* thus is anonymous *in the same sense* that the Gospels are! But we wouldn't seriously say that the book is anonymous or that we don't know who wrote it. The author's name is right up front! It's on the cover!

It could be claimed that *Misquoting Jesus* is a modern book, and its author's name was printed on the first edition, but that wasn't true of the Gospels. They circulated anonymously, and the names were put on them only in the late second century.

Let's suppose that's true for a moment—that the Gospels didn't originally have author attributions. Would that mean people didn't know who wrote them?

Consider the Gospel of Luke: he dedicates it to his patron Theophilus (1:3; cf. Acts 1:1). Obviously, Theophilus knew who the author was—especially if he was paying for it to be produced!

Similarly, in the Gospel of John, we find this passage:

Peter turned and saw following them the disciple whom Jesus loved. . . . When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?" Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!" The saying spread abroad among the brethren that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?"

This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things, and who has written these things (21:20–24).

This reveals the beloved disciple as the one writing the Gospel, and it reveals that his identity was known. There was a rumor that Jesus said he would never die!—a rumor he went out of his way to debunk, explaining that Jesus said only, "If it is my will that he remain until I come." Obviously, the identity of the author was known and intended to be crystal-clear to the audience. We would scarcely call a modern book anonymous if an author telegraphed his identity *that clearly* to the audience.

Matthew and Mark don't contain passages like this, but their identities also would have been known to the original audiences. It's not as if they would have written their Gospels completely in secret and then pitched them into a

church in the dead of night to keep their identities from being known. Had they done something so ridiculous, their books would have fallen under suspicion and never been copied and passed on.

Reason indicates that the identities of all four Evangelists were known in the early Church, which would have thanked and honored them for producing such precious records of the Savior.

This brings us back to whether the Gospels circulated without the authors' names on them. This is not impossible, though if so, the period could not have been long.

German scholar Martin Hengel points out that the uniformity of names we see in the early manuscripts means that the names were on them very early. The Gospel of Matthew is *always* called by Matthew's name, the Gospel of Mark by Mark's, etc. If they had circulated for a long period without these names, we wouldn't see this.

As soon as a church had more than one Gospel in its possession, it needed a way to distinguish them. For example, in the liturgy, the lector needed to tell the congregation what he was reading from.

If the Gospels had been long in circulation without written titles, churches would have called them different things. In one community, the Gospel of Matthew may have been called by that name, but in another, it would be called *The Life of Christ* or *The Gospel for the Jews*—or if people didn't know who wrote it, they may have attributed it to an important figure like Jesus' famous "brother" and called it *The Gospel According to James the Just*.

But we never see this. The four Gospels are always referred to by the same set of names. This means that if they *ever* circulated without names, the churches had to agree very early on what to call them, and so the current names were in use in the first century.⁴

7. Do we really know who wrote the Gospels?

The identities of the men who wrote the Gospels is not a matter of faith. What the Church teaches is that these are divinely inspired records of the life of Christ, but we do not have to know who wrote them for this to be the case.

We do not know the identities of the authors of many books of the Old Testament, but that didn't stop Jesus and the apostles from recognizing them

as inspired. Nor did it stop the Holy Spirit from guiding the Church to recognize this.

Yet we do have evidence regarding the authorship of the Gospels. The early Church's unanimous attribution of the Gospels to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John provides us with evidence that these were the men who wrote them. The fact that these attributions were made in the first century—when the authors' identities would have been known—only strengthens the case for their authorship.

Further, in the case of Matthew's Gospel, we know that Matthew was only a mid-level apostle, as his name appears only in the middle of the lists of the Twelve (Matt. 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). He thus was not in Jesus' inner circle, and his name would be an unlikely choice to give the Gospel extra authority.

Further, Matthew was a tax-collector (Matt. 10:3), and—as they were collaborators with the Romans—tax-collectors were despised in the Jewish community (5:46, 9:11, 11:19, 18:17, etc.). Yet Matthew is clearly written for a Jewish audience. In view of how Jews regarded tax-collectors, it would be very unlikely for Matthew's name to become associated with the most Jewish Gospel if he had not written it.

In the case of Mark, we have first-century testimony that it was written by John Mark, the companion of Peter. This testimony comes from a first-century figure—who was also an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry—named John the Elder. He informs us:

Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered, not, indeed, in order, of the things said or done by the Lord. For he had not heard the Lord, nor had he followed him, but later on, as I said, followed Peter, who used to give teaching as necessity demanded but not making, as it were, an arrangement of the Lord's oracles, so that Mark did nothing wrong in thus writing down single points as he remembered them. For to one thing he gave attention, to leave out nothing of what he had heard and to make no false statements in them.⁵

Writing around A.D. 200, Clement of Alexandria agrees:

When Peter had publicly preached the word at Rome, and by the Spirit had proclaimed the Gospel, that those present, who were many, exhorted Mark,

as one who had followed him for a long time and remembered what had been spoken, to make a record of what was said; and that he did this, and distributed the Gospel among those that asked him.⁶

The fact that Mark wasn't even an apostle also is evidence that he authored this Gospel. When ancient documents *were* falsely attributed to someone, that person was important. It was an attempt to get the document taken seriously by giving it a prestigious author.

Mark was a comparative nobody. He wasn't an apostle or an eyewitness of Jesus. He was only an apostolic companion, and not always a good one! Acts records that at one point, he abandoned the mission field, causing the apostles Paul and Barnabas to quarrel and dissolve their partnership (15:36–41). Mark later proved himself to Paul (see Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philem. 24), but he had a blemished record and was not the kind of authoritative figure to whom you'd want to falsely attribute a Gospel.

Luke has an unblemished record as a companion of Paul, but he too was a comparative nobody, being neither an apostle nor an eyewitness of Jesus, so he wasn't the kind of person a Gospel would end up falsely attributed to, either.

John alone among the Evangelists is commonly held to be a high-ranking apostle. John, son of Zebedee was in the inner circle of Jesus' followers—together with Peter and James (see Matt. 17:1; Mark 5:37)—and thus the kind of individual people might falsely attribute a Gospel to.

However, John's was the last Gospel written, and since the names of the Evangelists go back to the first century, that means that "according to John" was attached to it when the author's identity was still known. After all, there was the rumor he wouldn't die! It is thus highly likely that it was written by an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry named John.

This was the near-universal understanding in the early Church, though it is not always clear which John the earliest Church Fathers had in mind, as he is sometimes described as an apostle of Jesus and sometimes only as a disciple. A consensus view emerged that the Gospel was authored by John the apostle, and this has been the dominant view in Church history.

But again, which John was the author is not as clear as is often assumed. The case for it being John, son of Zebedee is based on the author's description of himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved (John 19:26, 20:2,

21:7, 20) and who leaned against his breast at the Last Supper (13:23). From this it is inferred that the disciple must have been one of the inner circle of the Twelve. But it could not have been Peter (see 13:23–25) or James, for he was the first of the Twelve to die (Acts 12:1–2). That would leave John, son of Zebedee.

This chain of reasoning depends on the inference that the beloved disciple must be one of the Twelve, but that is not guaranteed. It is likely Jesus had friendships with people who weren't among his traveling companions, so we need to consider whether there is evidence that could point toward one of them.

One piece of evidence is the seating arrangement at the Last Supper. Jesus repeatedly confirmed Peter as the head of the Twelve (Matt. 16:17–18; Luke 22:24–32; John 21:15–17), so why would he have the beloved disciple seated closer to him than Peter (John 13:23–25)? That would only stir up rivalries among the Twelve and undermine Peter's authority. A logical reason would be that the beloved disciple was not a member of the Twelve, but the owner of the house where the Last Supper was being held. As the host, it would be natural for him to be seated next to Jesus, the guest of honor.

Further, the beloved disciple appears to have been personally known to the high priest and his household staff (18:15–16). It is unlikely that an uneducated Galilean fisherman would have been on such intimate terms with the high priest, who associated with the Jerusalem elite. A member of the Jerusalem elite who had a house big enough to host the Last Supper would be much more likely to personally know the high priest. And John's Gospel spends much more time discussing Jesus' activities in and around Jerusalem than it does those in Galilee.

Consequently, some scholars have proposed that the fourth Gospel was written by a man from Jerusalem named John. In particular, he has been identified as the eyewitness of Jesus' ministry known as John the Elder (quoted above).⁷

On this view, the Gospel was later accidentally attributed to John, son of Zebedee because it was known to have been written by a friend and eyewitness named John, and the son of Zebedee was the most famous man meeting that description after memories of John the Elder began to fade.

In sum, we have good evidence—which dates from the first century—that

the Gospels were written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, though there is a question about which John. And, unless the fourth Gospel was written by John, son of Zebedee, none of the alleged authors is the kind of highly prestigious figure someone would invent as an author. Matthew was a mid-level apostle and a tax-collector; Mark and Luke were not apostles and not eyewitnesses; and—unless he was John, son of Zebedee—John also was not an apostle, though he was an eyewitness.

8. How did the Evangelists get their information?

To accurately report on what Jesus said and did, the Evangelists needed good information about him, and the question of how they got it is important.

Today, many scholars hold that the Gospels were not written until A.D. 70–100, though there is reason to challenge this (see answer 13). How was the information preserved between Jesus' ministry and the writing of the Gospels?

One proposal is that it was preserved by oral tradition passed down from one Christian to another in an elaborate, unreliable game of “telephone,” with many links between the original witnesses and the Evangelists. Each time a story about Jesus was retold, it was altered slightly, and after many retellings, we cannot trust the Gospel accounts, though they contain accurate elements.

This view was popular in the first part of the twentieth century in a movement known as *form criticism*, which classified passages according to their literary form (e.g., saying, parable, miracle story) and sought to understand how the material had changed before it was written down.

In the second half of the twentieth century, form criticism began to be criticized, and it is now widely rejected, though its legacy is still with us.

Any view that proposes a long period of oral tradition depends on the idea that the Evangelists were not the people to whom the Gospels were attributed, but later, unknown individuals. This view is highly problematic, and there is good evidence that the authors really were Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (see answers 6 and 7).

In that case, where did they get their information? Matthew was an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry, so his own experiences would have been one of his sources.

This doesn't mean he didn't use others. Approximately 90 percent of Mark is found in Matthew (see answers 11 and 12), so Matthew used and supplemented Mark. Some have questioned whether an eyewitness like Matthew would use Mark, but there were no copyrights in the first century, and if Matthew had a written account that he liked, he could easily use it rather than reinvent the wheel. This would particularly be true if the source were based on the preaching of Peter—the head apostle—and even more so more if the Gospel of Mark was meant to be *hupomnemata*—notes intended for the production of later, polished works (see answer 3).

We have explicit testimony regarding Mark's primary source: the preaching of Peter (see answer 7). Peter was an eyewitness, and so there was only one link—Peter—in the chain of tradition between the events and the Evangelist.

Luke contains approximately 50 percent of Mark, so the second Gospel was one of his principal sources, meaning this material was also just one link away from the events. Luke also tells us he had received information from “those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word” (Luke 1:2).

We can even determine some of the eyewitnesses whom Luke may have interviewed. In his Infancy Narrative, Luke twice mentions that Mary “kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (2:19; cf. 2:51). That identifies Mary as the source of this material, meaning either that Luke interviewed her or that he spoke with someone who did. Either way, there weren't many links in the chain of tradition.

Luke and Acts were likely written during Paul's two-year house arrest in Rome (A.D. 58–60; see answer 13), and Luke would have interviewed the two apostles in Rome at the time: Peter and Paul. This explains why Peter dominates the first part of Acts (chs. 1–12) before the narrative starts following Paul (chs. 13–28).

If Luke interviewed Peter for Acts, he also would have asked him about his experiences with Jesus, and so Peter was likely one of the sources Luke used in composing his Gospel.

Paul wasn't an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry, but he had his own post-Resurrection experiences with Jesus, and he was one of the “ministers of the word” Luke refers to. Not just anybody could become a minister in the first century. There was an approval process the apostles oversaw (Acts 13:2–3, 14:34; Titus 1:5). This shows that the early Church was concerned with

quality control regarding information about Jesus. It was not a chaotic, free-for-all game of “telephone.”

Regardless of which John wrote the Gospel, he was an eyewitness, and so his Gospel is direct, eyewitness testimony.

We thus see that the Gospels either were composed by eyewitnesses or are based on eyewitness testimony, with only one or two links in the chain of transmission.⁸

9. What are the synoptic Gospels?

Three of the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—have a special name. They are called the *synoptic Gospels*.

Synoptic comes from Greek roots meaning “seeing” (*opsis*) and “together” (*sun*). The three are called synoptic because they present the story of Jesus in similar ways. They share a common perspective (“see together”) on how to relate Jesus’ life.

All four Gospels deal with Jesus’ ministry, teaching, crucifixion, and resurrection. But Matthew, Mark, and Luke have many more similarities. The material they share is known as the “triple tradition” because it appears in all three, and it contains fifty-four passages (sayings, parables, and stories) found in *each* of the synoptics.

These include Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness, the call of the fishermen disciples, the healing of Simon (Peter)’s mother-in-law, the raising of Jairus’s daughter, the Transfiguration, the rich young ruler, paying taxes to Caesar, the institution of the Eucharist, and many more.

The synoptic Gospels often relate their content in almost identical words in Greek. This even shines through in English translation. Here are parallel passages, with the English words in common in boldface:

And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:20–21).

And he said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said to him, “Caesar’s.” Jesus said to them, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:16b–17).

“Whose likeness and inscription has it?” They said, “Caesar’s.” He said to them, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Luke 20:24–25).

There are only slight variations in wording, and the same is true in Greek. This happens in many passages throughout the synoptics.

Because of this—and the fact that John contains *some* material in common with the synoptics—it’s possible to arrange the Gospels in four parallel columns so you can see which material is in each Gospel and how the four Evangelists treat it. This kind of work is known as a *synopsis* of the four Gospels, and it is often used by Bible students and scholars.

There *are* differences among the synoptics. Each has sayings and stories that are unique (Mark having the fewest), and each Evangelist has his own style or way of relating material.

For example, Matthew prefers to use the phrase *kingdom of heaven*, whereas Mark and Luke prefer *kingdom of God*. Similarly, Matthew and Mark prefer the term *disciples*, whereas Luke commonly uses *apostles*. And Mark uses the term *gospel* much more than Matthew or Luke.

10. Why is John so different?

There are only sixteen passages (all stories) in John that are present in all three of the synoptics. One mentions the role of John the Baptist at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, one is the feeding of the five thousand (the only miracle besides the Resurrection in all four Gospels), and the rest are in the last week of Jesus’ life.

These stories are told differently—in John’s unique style, which records longer conversations and is more explicit about Jesus’ divinity and the role of the Holy Spirit (see answer 5).

How can we explain these differences? There are two basic options:

- (1) John hadn’t read the synoptics and so didn’t interact with them. He was simply pursuing his own interests as he wrote, and these didn’t overlap much with the synoptics.
- (2) John *had* read some or all of the synoptics and was deliberately doing something *different* from what they were doing.

The second option has been the most common in Church history, but through a good part of the twentieth century, the first became popular among scholars. In recent years, the first option has lost ground, and today, scholars are more open to the historic view.

What evidence is there concerning the two views? The evidence for the first would be based on how *different* John is from the synoptics—almost as if he’s not aware of them. But the differences in John also are consistent with the view that he *did* know them and was deliberately doing something different.

A close reading of John suggests that the historic view is the true one, but what was it that John was trying to do differently? We can determine this by looking at some curious omissions in the fourth Gospel.

The synoptics all have an account of Jesus’ baptism, and although John does discuss John the Baptist, he never actually *says* that John baptized Jesus. Instead, he says John saw the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus in the form of a dove—something we know from the synoptics—but he doesn’t say it happened *during* the baptism (see John 1:32–33). This is a curious omission we might not understand if we didn’t have the synoptics.

Another is found in John 3, where the Evangelist is discussing a location where John the Baptist was performing his ministry, and out of nowhere, he says, “For John had not yet been put in prison” (3:24). To someone who had only the Gospel of John, this would make no sense, for he nowhere else mentions John being put in prison.

We know from the synoptics that Herod Antipas imprisoned and eventually executed John the Baptist. The fourth Gospel doesn’t mention any of that. Yet the Evangelist seems to expect us to know about it, for he mentions that John’s imprisonment hadn’t *yet* happened as a way of explaining how John was baptizing when and where he was.

Another curious omission is the institution of the Eucharist. This is found in each of the synoptics, and John *has* an account of the Last Supper, but he doesn’t mention the institution of the Eucharist. It’s not as if John is uninterested in this topic. Just after the feeding of the five thousand, John has a lengthy discussion of the Eucharist (6:26–58). Yet when he relates the Last Supper, he curiously omits the institution of the sacrament for which he previously supplied a major discussion.

Why would he omit these things? John is clearly interested in the baptism

of Jesus, the arrest of John the Baptist, and the Eucharist. Otherwise, he wouldn't mention them at all. But if he's interested in them, why would he fail to include descriptions of the key events? The synoptics all have them!

And that's the point: the synoptics *do* describe these events. They were already on record in the Christian community, and so John doesn't *need* to record them. As the last of the Evangelists, John can assume that his readers were familiar with the synoptics, and that frees him up to record material not found in them.

Book production was fantastically expensive in the first century (see answer 1), and there was price pressure on John to keep his work affordable for the Christian community. Since he had a great deal of non-synoptic material to record, he chose to omit things he knew that the synoptics contained so that he would have space for his own material.

That explains what he's trying to do differently from the synoptics: he's trying to *supplement* them.² Even then, he knows he can't include everything, for in the end, he says, "There are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (21:25).

11. What is the synoptic problem?

The fact that Matthew, Mark, and Luke have so much in common has led scholars to investigate the relationship among the three. The issue of how they are related is known as the *synoptic problem*, and there have been many attempts to solve it.¹⁰

It would be hypothetically possible for each of the synoptic Evangelists to write his own Gospel from scratch—based only on oral tradition. However, if that happened, we wouldn't expect to see the amount of convergence we do among them. We wouldn't expect to see lengthy passages of almost word-for-word agreement in the triple tradition. This agreement applies not only to the sayings of Jesus (which might have been memorized), but also to the narrative that surrounds them.

Scholars since ancient times have concluded that there is a *literary relationship* among the three—meaning that one Evangelist wrote first and then the other two used his work when composing their own.

A key question in solving the synoptic problem is answering the question,

“Which Evangelist wrote first?”

We should note that the Church does not have a teaching on this question or on the synoptic problem in general. It leaves these matters to scholars to explore.

One strand of early tradition in the Church Fathers, which eventually became dominant and remained so for a long time, is that Matthew was the first Evangelist to write. It was often held that he wrote his Gospel in Hebrew or Aramaic, and it was then translated into Greek (see answer 18).

According to a hypothesis entertained by St. Augustine, Mark then wrote an abbreviated version of Matthew, and Luke wrote third, using both Matthew and Mark. This is known as the Augustinian hypothesis because the saint proposed it at the beginning of his *Harmony of the Gospels*, though by the end of the work it isn't clear that he definitely believed it.

The idea that Matthew wrote first is known as *Matthean priority* (i.e., Matthew was prior to the other Gospels). This view was common until the late 1700s, when it was proposed that Mark wrote first (*Marcan priority*), and this view gained ground. Today, the large majority of scholars—of all persuasions—hold that Mark was the first Gospel written.

One reason is that Mark's style is less polished than what we find in Matthew and Luke. (See answer 3 on how Matthew and Luke clean up Mark's repetitive use of “immediately.”)

Another reason is that Mark tends to use more words to relate an incident than the others. It looks as though—under price pressure—part of Matthew's and Luke's polishing process was *shortening* Mark's version so they'd have additional space to relate their own stories about Jesus.

Further, Mark omits really important material from Matthew (e.g., the Infancy Narrative and most of Jesus' teachings, including the Lord's Prayer). When he has material Matthew doesn't, it's low-value material (e.g., *one more* healing of a blind or deaf man). If Mark were based on Matthew, it's hard to explain why he would omit important things in favor of unimportant ones. It looks more likely that Mark wrote first and then Matthew omitted Mark's least important stories to make room for more important material.

The synoptic problem also deals with the relationship between Matthew and Luke. These Gospels contain about 235 verses in common, most of which deal with sayings of Jesus. To explain this, some scholars have

proposed that the two Evangelists relied on a now lost source, which has been dubbed Q, from the German word *Quelle* (“source”).

This led to what is known as the *Two-Source* hypothesis, according to which Mark and Q were the two sources combined by Matthew and Luke.

This leaves some of the material in the latter two Gospels unexplained. Both have passages unique to them (the Infancy Narratives being key examples). Such unique passages are referred to as the “special material” of each Gospel, and some scholars have proposed additional written sources for it. The source for the special material in Matthew has been dubbed *M*, and the source for Luke’s special material has been dubbed *L*.

This led to a *Four-Document* hypothesis, with the four sources behind the synoptic Gospels being Mark, Q, M, and L. Currently, the Four-Document hypothesis and variants on it are popular among scholars.

12. What alternatives are there to the Four-Document hypothesis?

Despite its popularity, the Four-Document view is far from universally agreed upon by scholars, and in recent decades, it has been increasingly challenged.

Q is only a hypothetical source. We have no copies of it, and there are other ways of explaining why Matthew and Luke have 235 verses in common, so Q may never have existed.

Even less certain is the existence of documents like M and L. Not only are they purely hypothetical, but it isn’t clear that Matthew or Luke would have used *documents* for this material.

Luke may have interviewed Mary *orally* for the material in his Infancy Narrative. Or, if he did have a written source for this, why should it be the *same* document from which he got the parable of the prodigal son (15:11–32)? It is more likely that Luke was combining material from multiple sources, both oral and written (cf. 1:1–2).

We thus should look at alternatives to the Four-Document hypothesis. One—known as the Griesbach hypothesis—holds that Matthew wrote first, Luke used Matthew, and then Mark edited Matthew and Luke together and produced a shorter, condensed account. This view is consistent with the fact that Mark contains almost nothing that isn’t found in either Matthew or Luke.

However, this view does not explain why Mark's language is less polished than Matthew's and Luke's (it looks more as though they polished Mark), why Mark uses more words to relate incidents (it looks more as though Matthew and Luke shortened Mark's prose to make space for new material), or why Mark omits so much high-value information contained in Matthew and Luke (the Virgin Birth, the Lord's Prayer, etc.) only to include a handful of low-value passages (additional healings of blind or deaf men).

Further, the Griesbach hypothesis directly contradicts the earliest information we have about Mark's Gospel, which holds that it was based on Peter's preaching—*not* Matthew and Luke. This information comes from John the Elder, who was a first-century eyewitness of Jesus' ministry, who was within the circle of those who wrote the New Testament, and who may have been one of its authors (see answer 7). Such testimony is not to be lightly set aside.

Another alternative is known as the Farrer hypothesis. According to this view, Mark wrote first, Matthew expanded Mark, and then Luke used both Mark and Matthew. This view does away with the need for a Q document, for the 235 verses that Matthew and Luke have in common could have been taken *directly from Matthew*, without needing an additional source.

A challenge for this view is how to explain the organization of this material in Luke. In Matthew, Jesus' sayings have been arranged into orderly speeches by topic—Matthew's five major discourses (see answer 2). However, if Luke took this material from Matthew, then he had to pull apart these speeches and scatter sayings here and there in his Gospel.

Some scholars have looked very unfavorably on this idea. Reginald Fuller said that if Luke did this, it would be "a case of unscrambling the egg with a vengeance!"¹¹ B.H. Streeter put the matter even more brusquely, saying that "a theory which would make an author capable of such a proceeding would only be tenable if, on other grounds, we had reason to believe he was a crank."¹²

An alternative that avoids this difficulty is known as the Wilke hypothesis. According to it, Mark wrote first, Luke expanded Mark, and then Matthew used Mark and Luke. This also does away with the need for Q. On this view, Matthew took the 235 verses directly from Luke, where they were scattered in different places. However, being the organizer that he was, Matthew then

took them and other sayings of Jesus and arranged them in orderly speeches by topic.

Although today almost all scholars agree that Mark was written first, and the Four-Document hypothesis remains popular, the alternatives are gaining ground. The present author favors the Wilke hypothesis.

13. When were the Gospels written?

Throughout Church history, Christians held that the Gospels were written in the first century by the individuals whose names they bear. However, both their authorship and dates came to be challenged.

Under the influence of skeptical nineteenth-century German scholars, it was popular for a time to hold that they were written very late, with John being written as late as A.D. 170! However, archaeological discoveries (including a fragment of the Gospel of John dated to around A.D. 125) pushed the proposed dates back into the first century.

Today, many scholars accept dates that are roughly as follows:

- Mark: 60–75, most likely between 68 and 73
- Matthew: 80–90, give or take a decade
- Luke: 85, give or take five to ten years
- John: 80–110 ¹³

These dates are not impossible, but a careful study of the evidence suggests that the Gospels were actually written earlier.

The particular dates that the Gospels should be assigned will depend on which view of the synoptic problem you accept. Here we will proceed on the Wilke hypothesis.

A key to dating the Gospels is the book of Acts, which spends its last seven chapters building toward Paul's trial before Nero Caesar. Yet it suddenly cuts off without telling us what happened at the trial it has been building to. The narrative suddenly stops around A.D. 60, with Paul under a two-year house arrest in Rome (28:30–31).

Luke spent a quarter of Acts dealing with Paul's trial, and it is inexplicable why Luke would stop at this point if he knew the outcome of Paul's trial. The

obvious solution is that he didn't know the outcome of the trial because it hadn't happened yet. In Acts, Luke wrote as far as the events of his own day and then stopped. This would put the composition of Acts in the second year of Paul's imprisonment.

That gives us a probable date for Luke. The end of Luke's Gospel shows signs that it was written with the beginning of Acts in mind, suggesting that Acts was written immediately after the Gospel of Luke was finished. We may thus estimate that Luke was written in the first year of Paul's house arrest (A.D. 59) and Acts was written in the second (A.D. 60).

Since Luke uses Mark, the latter must have written earlier. But if Mark is based on Peter's preaching, it must have been penned after Mark became a companion of Peter. Mark was a companion of Peter and Paul between A.D. 43 and 49 (Acts 15:36–39; cf. 13:1–13), so his time as Peter's companion must have begun in the A.D. 50s, making that the decade the second Gospel was written. We may thus estimate that Mark was written around A.D. 55.

On the Wilke hypothesis, Matthew was written after Luke, but it should not have been long afterward, for Matthew speaks as if the Jerusalem temple is still functioning (5:23–24; 12:5; 23:20–21), and it was destroyed in A.D. 70. He also speaks of the cataclysm of the Jewish War as still future (24:15–16, 20). Matthew thus would have been written after Luke in A.D. 59 but before the war, which began in A.D. 66, allowing us to estimate a date of 63 for Matthew.

It appears John was writing to supplement the synoptics (see answer 10), meaning he wrote after Mark, likely after Luke, and possibly after Matthew. He also speaks of architecture in Jerusalem that was destroyed in A.D. 70 as still standing (5:2). And when he discusses the martyrdom of Peter, he uses the future tense, indicating that Peter was not yet dead. Despite what you read in English translations, what he says in Greek is that Jesus predicted “by what death he [Peter] *shall* glorify God” (21:19, Young's Literal Translation). Since Peter was martyred in A.D. 66 or 67, we will estimate that John wrote in A.D. 65.

We thus propose the following approximate dates for the Gospels:

- Mark: 55
- Luke: 59

- Matthew: 63
- John: 65 ¹⁴

14. How reliable are the Gospels?

From the perspective of faith, the four Gospels—like all books of the Bible—are divinely inspired, and this has implications for their truth and reliability. According to the Second Vatican Council:

To compose the sacred books, God chose certain men who, all the while he employed them in this task, made full use of their own faculties and powers so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written, and no more.

Since therefore all that the inspired authors or sacred writers affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully, and without error teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred scriptures (*Dei Verbum* 11).

Since, under divine inspiration, the Evangelists wrote “whatever [God] wanted written, and no more,” whatever the Gospels affirm is “affirmed by the Holy Spirit” and so teaches the truth “without error.” The Gospels are thus completely reliable.

This doesn’t mean that what the Evangelist is affirming is always obvious (see answer 15), but it does mean that if we have properly understood what the Evangelist is saying, God guarantees that it’s true.

Not everyone shares the faith perspective, so we should consider how far the reliability of the Gospels also can be shown from the perspective of reason, which can lead us to faith.

In the wave of skeptical scholarship that began a little more than two hundred years ago, everything was questioned and challenged. Skeptics came to hold that the Gospels were written by anonymous individuals, long after the events they portray, and that the stories and sayings of Jesus were the product of long periods of oral transmission in an unreliable game of “telephone.”

There are reasons to reject each of these claims. The Gospels were written

by the men whose names are on them, they were written quite early, and they are based on eyewitness or near-eyewitness testimony (see answers 7, 8, and 13). But we have additional ways of showing the reliability of the Gospels from the reason perspective.

The synoptic problem helps, because it shows us how the Evangelists treated their sources. When Matthew and Luke used Mark's Gospel, they didn't radically alter the substance of individual sayings or stories. They polished the language, but they carefully preserved the substance. The fact that there are so many passages with near word-for-word agreement shows how careful they were with Mark. And if they were careful with this source, that gives us evidence that they were careful with other sources they would have used.

We also have evidence that Mark was careful. In the first century, one of the great controversies in the Church was whether Christians had to obey the Mosaic Law, which would mean that certain foods were unclean to eat, as some early Christians claimed (Rom. 14:1; Col. 2:16).

It would have been convenient to have a saying from Jesus that settled the matter, and if the Evangelists had felt free to make up sayings of Jesus, they would have done so. But we find Mark doing something very different. In a discussion with the Pharisees over whether it is necessary to eat with clean hands, Mark records Jesus as saying:

“Do you not see that whatever goes into a man from outside cannot defile him, since it enters, not his heart but his stomach, and so passes on?”
(Thus he declared all foods clean.) (7:18–19).

The parenthetical statement is an inference Mark draws from what Jesus said. If nothing that enters a man makes him unclean, then that applies to food as well as dirt that might be on his hands. But Mark doesn't put this inference on Jesus' lips. He preserves Jesus' saying intact and draws an inference from it rather than modifying what Jesus said.

Acts is another boon in assessing the reliability of the Evangelists. Acts covers a much wider span of time (about thirty years) and ranges all over the Greco-Roman world, meaning it gives us many more claims that can be checked. When this is done, we find that Luke was extraordinarily accurate.

British scholar William Ramsay did a study of Acts—expecting it to be

unreliable—only to conclude that “Acts may justly be quoted as a trustworthy historical authority” and “Luke is a historian of the first rank. . . . In short, this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians.”¹⁵

15. Are there contradictions in the Gospels?

Sometimes skeptics assert that there are contradictions in the Gospels. It is important to know how to address these claims.

In the first place, the alleged contradictions are never about major matters. Skeptics are not able to point to passages saying that Jesus was a Greek rather than a Jew, that Joseph was his biological father, or that he was stoned rather than crucified. Invariably, the alleged contradictions are minor. Thus, even if there were discrepancies among the Gospels, they would be on lesser matters, and their substance would still be correct.

However, it turns out that the alleged, minor discrepancies are not contradictions. They might appear so to skeptics reading the Gospels as if they were written according to modern conventions. But when we examine the way ancient literature was written, we find they are not.

The Second Vatican Council points out the need to study the way ancient authors wrote:

Seeing that, in Sacred Scripture, God speaks through men in human fashion, it follows that the interpreter of sacred scriptures, if he is to ascertain what God has wished to communicate to us, should carefully search out the meaning which the sacred writers really had in mind, that meaning which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of their words (*Dei Verbum* 12).

Here we will look at three ancient writing practices that can trip up modern readers: selection, paraphrase, and sequencing.

Selection deals with what material an author chooses to include. Because books were fantastically expensive and the Evangelists wanted to keep their works small enough to fit on a single scroll, they had to choose which details to include and which to omit (see answers 1 and 10). John even alludes to the fact that he knew much more than he was able to write (21:25).

The Evangelists make choices about what details to mention and omit, and

sometimes skeptics portray these as contradictions. For example, Mark 10:46–52 records how Jesus healed blind Bartimaeus at Jericho, although Matthew 9:27–31 indicates that he healed two blind men on that occasion.

This is not a contradiction. Mark simply focuses on Bartimaeus, whereas Matthew mentions the other blind man. This has been compared to how witnesses to a car crash may report different details without contradicting each other.

Paraphrase is using different words to convey the same meaning. We do this constantly in everyday speech. We communicate the gist of what someone said to us without using his exact words. But in written works, we don't expect to see paraphrases put between quotation marks. This is partly due to the fact that we live in a world of recording devices, and it's much easier to check what someone said and give his words exactly.

But they didn't have recorders in the ancient world. They also didn't have quotation marks (those are added by Bible translators), and so ancient audiences didn't expect authors to always give exact wording. They expected authors to accurately give the gist of what someone would have said on an occasion, but not the precise wording.

For example, Matthew gives the opening of the Lord's Prayer like this: "Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (6:9–10), whereas Luke gives it in a shorter form: "Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come" (11:2).

Ancient audiences would regard this not as a contradiction, but as the kind of paraphrase they would normally expect. Both authors preserve the same meaning; it's just that the wording of the prayer is slightly different.

Sequencing deals with the order in which an author presents his material. This can be done different ways. Sometimes an author may present material in a strict chronological sequence, but other times, he may arrange it by topic.

This can trip up modern readers because we live in an age in which records are often kept about precisely when things occurred. In the ancient world, this usually wasn't the case. People would remember *what* happened, but not the *exact date*. As a result, ancient audiences didn't expect an author to keep things in strictly chronological order unless he said that is what he was doing.

Thus, when Matthew collects different sayings of Jesus and arranges them

into speeches by topic, such as in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7), the original audience would not have understood him as claiming that Jesus literally delivered all these sayings, in this order, on a single occasion. For them, the important thing would have been *that* Jesus said them, not *when* he said them.

An awareness that the Evangelists—like other ancient authors—may use topical rather than chronological sequencing thus resolves alleged discrepancies regarding chronology in the Gospels.

Ultimately, there are no contradictions in the Gospels, but showing this requires us to understand what the Evangelists were and weren't affirming, which requires a knowledge of how ancient literature worked.

16. Do we know anything about Jesus from outside the Gospels?

The Gospels are our *best* source of information about Jesus but not our *only* source. If we didn't have Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we would still know a good bit about him.

Our second-best source is the other books of the New Testament, which also date to the A.D. 50s and 60s. None of these is a book *about* Jesus' life (otherwise, they'd *be* Gospels). For example, Paul's letters are about addressing pastoral situations in various churches. But they contain significant information about Jesus, and we learn dozens of things about him.¹⁶

These include facts like that Jesus was regarded as the Jewish Messiah and was crucified (1 Cor. 1:22–23), that he was descended from David and also the Son of God (Rom. 1:3), that he had a group of followers known as “the Twelve” and “apostles” (1 Cor. 5:5, 7), that Jesus' own countrymen sought to have him killed (1 Thess. 2:15), that Pontius Pilate tried him (1 Tim. 6:15), that he rose “on the third day” (1 Cor. 15:3–4), and that he ascended to heaven (Eph. 4:8–10), where he is now (Rom. 10:6).

We also learn about Jesus' family, including his “brethren” and his notable kinsman James (1 Cor. 9:5; Gal. 1:19), and that Jesus had a particularly notable follower named Cephas—that is, Peter (1 Cor. 5:5; Gal. 1:18–19, 2:9).

We learn that he instituted the Eucharist on the night he was betrayed (1 Cor. 10:23–25) and that he gave teachings on subjects like divorce (1 Cor.

7:10–11).

Even though Paul doesn't attribute certain teachings directly to Jesus, we find him stating that love is the fulfillment of the Mosaic Law (Rom. 13:8), that we should bless those who persecute us (Rom. 13:14), and that we should not pass judgment on others (Rom. 14:4). Given Paul's attitude toward Jesus, we might then infer that Jesus also taught these things.

We also know about Jesus from the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus, who mentions him twice, though one of the passages has been partially corrupted.¹⁷

We even know of sayings attributed to Jesus that are not in the Gospels. These sayings are referred to as *agrapha* since they are not written in the Gospels (Greek, *a-* "not" + *graphê* "writing").

The clearest and most certain is in Acts, where Paul remembers "the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (20:35).

Other *agrapha* are not as certain, but scholars have identified a number of other sayings attributed to Jesus in early Christian sources that may be authentic.¹⁸

Papias—a late first- and early second-century author—records a saying from "John, the disciple of the Lord" (John the Elder?) in which Jesus taught about the glories of the coming of God's kingdom and said,

The days will come, in which vines shall grow, each having ten thousand branches, and in each branch ten thousand twigs, and in each true twig ten thousand shoots, and in each one of the shoots ten thousand clusters, and on every one of the clusters ten thousand grapes, and every grape when pressed will give five and twenty measures of wine. And when any one of the saints shall lay hold of a cluster, another shall cry out, "I am a better cluster, take me; bless the Lord through me."¹⁹

Papias also records that when Judas objected, questioning how this would be possible, Jesus enigmatically replied, "Those who live until those times will see."²⁰

Similarly, the first-century document known as the *Letter of Barnabas* records Jesus as saying, "Those who desire to see me and to take hold of my kingdom must take hold of me through affliction and suffering" (7:11). And,

writing around A.D. 150, St. Justin Martyr records Jesus as saying, “In whatever state I lay hold of you, in this state I will also judge you.”²¹

These sayings are not found in the inspired documents of the New Testament, so they are not certain. However, they are found in very early, orthodox Christian sources, and they should be given consideration as things Jesus *may* have said.

17. Are there lost gospels?

There are books about Jesus and his life that we no longer have. We know the names of several from the Church Fathers.

One was the *Gospel According to the Hebrews*, and in the early 300s, Eusebius tells us it was disputed, with some considering it canonical, whereas others did not. He remarked that it was a work “in which the Hebrews who have accepted Christ especially delight.”²²

It was significant enough that St. Jerome translated it into Greek and Latin, and he relates that it included a passage about the otherwise obscure post-Resurrection appearance of Jesus to his “brother” James the Just (1 Cor. 15:7):

The Lord, however, after he had given his grave clothes to the servant of the priest, appeared to James, for James had sworn that he would not eat bread from that hour in which he drank the cup of the Lord until he should see him rising again from among those that sleep. . . . “Bring a table and bread,” said the Lord.” . . . He brought bread and blessed and broke it and gave to James the Just and said to him, “My brother, eat your bread, for the Son of Man is risen from among those that sleep.”²³

In other cases, we don’t know the name of a lost gospel, but we still have fragments of it. In 1905 a parchment fragment of an unknown gospel was found at Oxyrhynchus, Egypt. Today it is known as *Papyrus Oxyrhynchus* 840, and it includes a story about Jesus having a dispute with a Pharisee high priest about ritual purity in the temple courts. During the course of the conversation, Jesus says:

Woe to you blind who do not see. You have washed in these waters that have been poured out, in which dogs and swine have wallowed night and

day. And when you washed you scoured the outer skin, which even prostitutes and flute girls anoint, wash, scour, and beautify for human lust. But inside they are full of scorpions and every evil.²⁴

We have fragments from other works we can tell were gospels, but unless fuller copies of them are found, they will remain lost.

It is important not to treat every claim of a lost gospel as automatically true. Some have proposed that Q should be considered a lost gospel, but we do not know that Q even existed, as it's a purely hypothetical source (see answers 11 and 12).

There have been reports of lost gospels that turned out to be false. One came to public attention in 1973, when historian Morton Smith claimed to have discovered a letter from Clement of Alexandria in which the Church Father discussed a “secret” version of Mark that included additional passages. The letter Smith claimed to have found was unavailable for study, but some in the scholarly community were open to the idea that there was a *Secret Gospel of Mark*. More recently, a strong case has emerged that the letter was a hoax perpetrated by Smith himself.²⁵

In 2012, American scholar Karen King announced the discovery of a fragment in which Jesus referred to “my wife.” The fragment then was said to be from a lost gospel, and it was immediately dubbed the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife*. However, in 2016, *The Atlantic* published an investigative piece that revealed that King had been taken in by a forger, and King herself acknowledged that this was what the new evidence suggested.²⁶

Although there are lost gospels, we need to be careful and should not get overly excited. There have been forgeries and hoaxes, and even if genuine lost gospels were rediscovered (as they have been from time to time; see answer 19), they would not be on the same level as the canonical ones. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John came to be recognized as canonical *because* they were the earliest, most reliable writings about Jesus and were handed on to the Church by the apostles as authoritative. Anything else does not have the same reliability or authority.

18. Did Matthew write a “Hebrew” Gospel?

One of the most intriguing possibilities concerning lost gospels is the idea that Matthew may have written one. According to various sources, Matthew

originally wrote a Gospel in Hebrew (or Aramaic) that was later translated into Greek and became part of the New Testament.

Whether this would be considered a lost gospel—or merely an alternate-language version of a gospel that we have—would depend on the definition you use. But even if it were just an original-language version, its discovery would be tremendously exciting to scholars, as having an original-language text would shed light on multiple passages.

Possibly the earliest reference we have to the idea is found in the late first- and early second-century author Papias. After discussing the origin of Mark, he states,

So then Matthew compiled the oracles in the Hebrew dialect, and everyone interpreted them as he was able.²⁷

It isn't clear from context whether this statement comes from John the Elder (see answer 7) or from Papias, and this makes it less certain what weight it should be given.

Another difficulty is that the passage is notoriously difficult to translate. The key terms can be understood in multiple ways:

- “Compiled” (*sunetaxeto*) could also mean “composed” or “arranged.”
- “Oracles” (*logia*) could also mean “sayings.”
- “Hebrew” (*hebraidi*) could mean the *actual* Hebrew language or Aramaic, which was the common language among Hebrews at the time.
- “Dialect” (*dialektô*) could also mean “language,” “idiom,” or “style.”
- “Interpreted” (*hêrmêneusen*) could also mean “translated,” “transmitted,” “communicated,” or “explained.”²⁸

As a result, Papias's statement can be understood different ways, a few of which include:

- (1) Matthew wrote his Gospel in Hebrew or Aramaic, and everyone translated it into Greek as best he could.
- (2) Matthew compiled the Old Testament oracles about Jesus in a Hebrew style, and everyone sought to understand them as best he could.

(3) Matthew arranged the sayings *of* Jesus in a Hebrew style, and everyone sought to understand them as best he could.

(4) Matthew wrote the sayings *about* Jesus in a Hebrew style, and everyone sought to understand them as best he could.

Option (1) would mean that Matthew originally wrote his Gospel in a Semitic language, and then multiple people translated it into Greek.

Option (2) would mean that Matthew composed some kind of collection of Old Testament prophecies about Jesus. These could have been in a separate document, possibly one that was later incorporated into Matthew. Or he could have written them directly into his Gospel as he composed it (i.e., the fulfillment passages that characterize Matthew; see answer 2).

Option (3) would mean that Matthew collected Jesus' sayings (as in the Sermon on the Mount and the other major discourses in Matthew). Again, this could have been in a separate document that was later incorporated into Matthew, or he could have collected them *as* he was composing the Gospel.

Option (4) would mean that Matthew collected the sayings *about* Jesus (i.e., stories of his words and deeds) and put them together in a Hebrew style, which Gentile readers then sought to understand as best they could.

Many in the early Church took Papias to mean the first possibility. However, if Matthew wrote any such document, we do not have it.

Furthermore, if "everybody translated [it] as he was able," you might expect us to have multiple Greek versions of Matthew, but we don't. We have only one, and it doesn't read like a translation. Its Greek is too good for that, and—like other books of the New Testament—Matthew normally quotes the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, rather than directly translating the Hebrew. This suggests that it was composed in Greek.

Particularly noteworthy is 1:23, where Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14's prophecy from the Septuagint: "Behold, a *parthenos* shall conceive and bear a son." *Parthenos* is a Greek word that specifically means "virgin." However, the Hebrew term Isaiah used—'*almah*'—is more general and just means a young woman old enough to marry, not a virgin specifically. This suggests that Matthew was writing in Greek, because the Greek version brings out more clearly the miraculous nature of Jesus' birth.

Also against this interpretation is the fact that Matthew uses 90 percent of

Mark, and Mark was written in Greek.

Options (2)-(4) are consistent with the idea of Matthew writing his Gospel in Greek, though in a Hebrew style that Gentile readers understood as best they could. Matthew certainly was written for a Jewish audience, and Gentile readers would have faced challenges in understanding some of the Jewish references it contains.

In favor of (2) is the fact that the term *oracles* would most commonly mean Old Testament prophecies. Against this is that Matthew's fulfillment passages are a lesser element in his Gospel. They're not prominent enough that we would expect comment on them here.

In favor of (3) is the fact Matthew obviously collected the sayings of Jesus into his five discourses, which are one of the most prominent features of his Gospel. Also, in context, Papias is contrasting what Matthew did with what John the Elder says Mark did (see answer 7). Mark wrote accurately but did not make "an arrangement of the Lord's oracles," whereas—in his Gospel—Matthew *did* "arrange the sayings in a Hebrew style" that wouldn't always be clear to Gentile readers.

Given the difficulties with (1) and (2), it is probable that (3) or (4) is what Papias meant (either that or he was simply mistaken). It remains *possible* that Matthew wrote something in Hebrew or Aramaic—a kind of *proto-Matthew*—and this *may* have been incorporated into the canonical Gospel. However, this—like Q—is hypothetical, and Matthew as we have it appears to have been both based on Mark and written in Greek.

19. What about non-canonical Gospels?

In addition to the lost gospels we know existed, we have several non-canonical gospels that survive in whole or in part, with many being discovered only recently. These surviving, non-canonical gospels include:

- the *Infancy Gospel of James* (AKA the *Protoevangelium of James*), which relates the birth and life of the Virgin Mary, including Jesus' birth and the flight to Egypt
- the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, which covers Jesus' life from ages five to twelve
- the *Gospel of Thomas*, a collection of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus, some

of which are based on ones found in the canonical Gospels

- the *Gospel of Judas*, which concerns a dialogue set during the Last Supper
- the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, which concerns Jesus' trial before Pilate and his descent into hell
- the *Gospel of Peter*, which concerns Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection
- the *Gospel of Mary*, which concerns a dialogue set after the Resurrection between Jesus and "Mary" (probably Mary Magdalene)

A notable thing about these gospels is that none follows the pattern of the canonical Gospels—i.e., telling a complete story of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection.

They thus *presuppose* the canonical Gospels. Once again, the fantastic price of books and the need to keep them short meant that their authors did not have the space to do yet another narrative retelling of Jesus' career. Instead, they focus only on individual aspects of his story.

This has important implications. The fact that these authors *presuppose* and *rely on* the canonical Gospels testifies to the canonical Gospels' importance in the early Christian community. They were the original Gospels, and they were universally accepted—even by the authors of non-canonical ones. These authors *agree* that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are accurate accounts of Jesus' life. They just want to supplement and adjust the Evangelists' interpretation.

Another important implication of the authors' reliance on the canonical Gospels is that they are *later* works. They date to the second and third centuries—or even later—and so scholars do not regard them as reliable sources of information about Jesus. Some of the earliest and most orthodox ones (e.g., the *Infancy Gospel of James*) may contain *some* accurate traditions regarding Jesus and his family, but they simply are not as reliable as the first-century, canonical ones.

Further, many of these works contain ideas belonging to the Gnostic heresy that emerged in the second century. That is why many non-canonical gospels take the form of dialogues between Jesus and various disciples after his resurrection (the *Gospel of Mary* being an example). In these dialogues, Jesus is shown imparting "secret" Gnostic teachings to select disciples—

allowing later Gnostics to explain why their views were not supported by the Catholic Church and were not openly taught by the apostles.

Scholars freely admit that the Gnostic gospels don't tell us anything reliable about Jesus. Instead, their historical value is in telling us about *later heretical groups of Christians* and what they believed.

20. How can I grow closer to Jesus by reading the Gospels?

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are by far our best sources of information about Jesus, and one of the best ways to grow closer to Jesus is by reading them. We should do everything possible to learn about our Lord and Savior, and this definitely includes studying what God's inspired word has to say about him.

The Gospels are available in many translations, editions, and formats. The Douay-Rheims (the Catholic equivalent of the King James Version) uses elevated, Elizabethan English for those who prefer that, and there are numerous modern versions with different reading levels, from the more challenging to the very simple. Some translate the Greek in a formal, word-for-word manner, whereas others render it in a more dynamic, thought-for-thought way.

When it comes to editions of these translations, some come with only a few footnotes, whereas others are accompanied with extensive study notes, introductions, maps, timelines, and other study aids.

The Gospels are published in formats including everything from leatherbound, hardbound, and paperback Bibles to individual pocket editions containing just the four Gospels to electronic versions that can be found in special Bible study apps or as ebooks or web pages. There are even audiobook editions.

If you've never read the Gospels, they can take getting used to, for they are written differently from how books are written today. When I first read them, I had a negative reaction to Matthew and how different it seemed from what I normally read. I initially liked Mark even less. But by the time I began Luke, I had learned the way the Gospels work as literature, and today, I love all four of them, with Matthew being my favorite. There is a learning curve when reading the Gospels, so persevere! You will come to understand and appreciate what the authors are doing.

To get the most out of the Gospels, it is important not just to read them, but to read them multiple *ways*. For example, you initially might read them individually, a bit at a time—maybe a chapter or two a day—starting with Matthew and ending with John.

However, later, you should try reading the Gospels in single sittings so that you get the whole flow of a Gospel at once. Set aside two or three hours, read a Gospel, then reflect on its meaning and appreciate what that Evangelist was doing. After you’ve had time to digest it, set aside a few more hours to read another Gospel and do the same.

In addition to reading the Gospels individually, you can also read them together. For this, having a synopsis that arranges their text in parallel columns is helpful. This will let you see the choices the Evangelists made about what to include, what to omit, what themes to bring out, and what details to emphasize.

At times, you will want to read the Gospels slowly, taking each word in a passage one at a time, thinking about all the possible meanings it might have, and then using clues in the context to help figure out the most probable meanings.

Bear in mind that the Gospels were never meant to be read *alone*. They were meant to be accompanied by the apostolic preaching, which could fill in and clarify things. The Gospels do contain “hard sayings” (see John 6:60), and you will encounter things you need to consult other resources to understand.

One of the best things you can do is read the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (all of it!) so that you have a good grounding in the Faith as a whole. When it comes to specific aids to study the Gospels, there are study guides, commentaries, and books on Bible difficulties that can clarify many points.

Reading the Gospels must not be just an intellectual exercise, for they were meant to enrich us spiritually. There should be a spiritual focus to your study.

Many people pray before and after they study Scripture, asking the Holy Spirit to enlighten their understanding as they read, and afterward thanking God for sharing his word with us.

Another good technique is imagining yourself as present at the events you are reading about. How would you have reacted? What would you have thought and felt? If Jesus is giving an ethical teaching, how can you apply it

in your life? If he's giving a warning, to what extent does it apply to you? If he's giving encouragement, how can you appropriate it? And what do his actions reveal about his love both for people in general and for you in particular?

Many engage in a practice known as *lectio divina* (Latin, "divine reading"), which involves a four-stage process of reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. This also can be a valuable spiritual approach to the Gospels.

Never before in history have the Gospels been available in so many formats and made accessible to so many people. Never before have there been so many aids to help us get the most out of them. But we need to read them if we want to know and grow closer to Jesus.

1 Jimmy Akin, "The Cost of the Gospels and the Synoptic Problem," JimmyAkin.com.

2 Matthew Larsen, *Gospels Before the Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

3 Preserved in Eusebius, *Church History* 6:14:7.

4 Martin Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (London: SCM Press, 1985), ch. 3.

5 Preserved in Eusebius, *Church History* 3:39:15.

6 Preserved in Eusebius, *Church History* 6:14:6.

7 See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (London: SCM Press, 1990); see also Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 2007), ch. 8.

8 See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017).

9 See Richard Bauckham, "John for Readers of Mark" in *The Gospels for All Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), Jimmy Akin, "Did John Use Mark as a Template?" online at JimmyAkin.com.

10 For an extensive discussion of the Synoptic problem, see Jimmy Akin, "The Synoptic Problem," online at JimmyAkin.com/Synoptic.

- 11 Reginald Fuller, *The New Testament in Current Study* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), 74.
- 12 B.H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins* (London: Macmillan, 1930), 183.
- 13 Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), chs. 7, 8, 9, and 11.
- 14 For more discussion, see Jimmy Akin, *The Bible Is a Catholic Book* (San Diego: Catholic Answers, 2019), and especially Jimmy Akin, "When Were the Gospels Written?" online at JimmyAkin.com.
- 15 William Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915), 222.
- 16 See Jimmy Akin, "Jesus Without the Gospels," online at JimmyAkin.com.
- 17 Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18:3:3(63–64); 20:9:1(200).
- 18 See Rick Brannan, *Greek Apocryphal Gospels, Fragments, and Agrapha: Introductions and Translations* (Bellingham, Washington: Lexham Press, 2013).
- 19 Preserved in Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5:33:3.
- 20 Op. cit., 5:33:4.
- 21 Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 47.
- 22 Eusebius, *Church History* 3:25:5.
- 23 See Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men* 2:11–14.
- 24 Bart D. Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše. *The Other Gospels: Accounts of Jesus from Outside the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 138–139.
- 25 See Stephen C. Carlson, *The Gospel Hoax: Morton Smith's Invention of Secret Mark* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2005).
- 26 See Ariel Sabar, "The Unbelievable Tale of Jesus's Wife," *The Atlantic* (July/August 2016) and "Karen King Responds to 'The Unbelievable Tale of Jesus's Wife,'" online at TheAtlantic.com.
- 27 Preserved in Eusebius, *Church History* 3:39:16.
- 28 Chris McKnight, "Matthew, Gospel of, Hebrew Version of," *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, Washington: Lexham Press, 2016).

About the Author

Jimmy Akin is an internationally known author and speaker. He is the senior apologist at Catholic Answers. Jimmy has a degree in philosophy from the University of Arkansas and has worked professionally as an apologist for more than twenty-five years. His areas of expertise include apologetics, biblical studies, patristics, canon law, liturgical law, and philosophy. He is the author of numerous books, booklets, and articles. Jimmy's apologetic articles may be found online at catholic.com and his personal website, jimmyakin.com. He is a regular guest on *Catholic Answers Live* and also appears on other radio programs and podcasts.